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*Ti*sese and Its Anthropological Significance

Issues around the Visiting Sexual System among the Moso

Chuan-kang Shih

AFTER dominating the central discourse of social-cultural anthropology for more than half a century, kinship studies began to loose steam in the 1970s due to a lack of refreshing controversies and theoretical innovations. More recently, however, anthropology has been witnessing a renewed interest in kinship, marriage, and the family because of their essential relevance to such wide ranging current concerns as gender, identity, ethnicity, political economy, and anthropological demography (e.g. Collier & Yanagisako 1987 ; Skinner 1997 ; Harrell 1997, 2000 ; Lamphere 1997). Riding on this new tide, the practice of a non-contractual, nonobligatory, and nonexclusive visiting sexual system among a matrilineal group in Southwest China has generated as much interests in anthropology as in the popular media. Even though serious anthropological publications on this case have just begun to emerge, heated controversy has been on the rise – a healthy phenomenon suggesting the tremendous vitality of its theoretical relevance. This short paper is to address some of the more salient controversies that have been waged, and to demonstrate the anthropological significance of this very unusual case.

The People : What to Call Them ?

In the growing body of literature in Western languages on this case, both the nomenclature and its spelling of the people have emerged as a point of controversy. Whereas some writers take their choice of usage for granted, others have been careful enough to engage in constructive debate on this issue (Shih 1993, Harrell 2000).

The name of the group in question has appeared in recent works as Moso (Jackson 1989 ; Aris 1992 ; Shih 1993, 1998 ; Oppitz & Hsu 1998), Mosuo (Knödel 1995 ; Guo 1997), Naze (Weng 1993 ; Harrell 1997, 2000), and Na (Cai 1997). While the first two are variants of a name used by the members of

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this population as well as by their neighbors, the last two are variants of what they use to refer to themselves in their own language. It appears at first glance that scholars are divided on whether to honor the self-appellation in the native language. In the current postcolonial ethos, anything other than a positive stance on that question smacks of « prejudicing our own conclusions by speaking in Han categories » (Harrell 2000 [p. 406 of manuscript]) and hence is objectionable. The politics of group naming in this case, however, is far more complicated than simply taking a side. What makes the matter more complicated than usual is the fact that although there is a consensus among the native people that they should not be called Naxi – an identity imposed by the government –, there is no consensus as to what they should be called in Western languages. On one occasion the field worker may be told by informants that he or she could not go wrong by naming the group as Nari (or Naze, depending on how one transcribes the phonetic symbol «ʐ» into a Western language). On another, the same researcher may be warned that no name other than Mosuo, or Na, or even Mongolian for that matter, should be used. The informants tell the researcher different stories depending on different considerations at the time of the interview. All the considerations are equally spontaneous and thus legitimate. The onus, then, falls on the anthropologist to exercise circumspect volition.

During my numerous field trips spanning from 1987 to 1997, I recurrently elicited native opinions on the ticklish issue of group naming. After having heard different voices and pondered carefully upon all the arguments behind them, including those of the Western scholars, I am reassured that « Moso » is the most sensible term to be used in Western languages. Apparently, it would not suffice to buttress my proposition by simply pointing out the fact that most people I have talked with told me they preferred to be called Mosuo and nothing else. The more profound considerations include the following :

First and most important, in reasoning why they prefer not to be called by their name in their own language, the more thoughtful informants of mine pointed out that it is objectionable to let outsiders call them Na or any other name derived from Na because it would suggest that they are indeed a subgroup of the Naxi, since Naxi itself means exactly « the Na people », and thus sabotaging their ongoing struggle to obtain the status of a unitary ethnic group from the government. Second, since the 1950s, if not earlier, « Mosuo » has become the appellation voluntarily adopted by the cultural group centered at Yongning to distinguish themselves from any other group, especially the Naxi. In their struggle to obtain unitary ethnic status from the government, the native people have consistently insisted that « Mosuo » should be their « official group name » *(zhengshi zucheng).* Moreover, this appellation has been invariably used by all the neighboring groups, including the Pumi, Naxi, Han, and Yi, to refer to the group in question. Third, admittedly, the above considerations are partial to the Yongning centered people. About half the members of the same culture live across the provincial border in Sichuan. For some historical and geopolitical reasons, they may prefer to be called Mongolian. However, since there is no solu-

tion that could possibly be universally representative, and also since « Mongolian » is the most problematic among all existent appellations, this difference in preference should not deter us from settling on « Mosuo » when the subject of discourse is the people centered in Yongning. And fourth, as to the spelling of this term in Western languages, « Moso » is preferable to « Mosuo ». As I discussed in detail elsewhere, this term must have originated either from the ancestors of the group or their neighbors in ancient times, and « Mosuo » is only one of the many transliterations that appeared in the Chinese language in about the third century. When writing in Western languages, there is no good reason for the writer to bend to the Chinese phonetic approximation and the Chinese spelling in *pinyin*. « Moso » looks and sounds more natural in Western languages and, as a transliteration drawing on the available phonetic resources of the host language, is as valid as « Mosuo » in Chinese[1].

The Visiting System : What to Call It ?

The intriguing stories of the Moso first caught the imaginations of the general public as well as the Western or Western-trained anthropologists via two Chinese ethnographies published in the early 1980s (Zhan *et al.* 1980 ; Yan & Song 1983). Ironically, however, the books that made this fascinating yet unknown case world famous have turned out to become classical examples illustrating the pitfalls in ethnographic representation. Committed to the Morganian-Engelsian theoretical framework and unaware of the development in Western anthropology, their authors thought they had just discovered a « living fossil » (Yan 1982) that would fill a gap in the chain of evidence supporting the Marxist social theory. Against the evolutionary ladder set by Morgan, and endorsed by Marx and Engels, the Moso practice was assigned to the stage of late primitive society. This representation was met immediately with vehement backlash from the Moso who felt their ethnic dignity had been mortified. Consequently, *« azhu hunyin »,* the term coined by the Chinese ethnologists for the Moso visit-ing sexual system, was categorically rejected as a misconception. The first component of the term, *azhu*, is a word in Naru, the Moso language, borrowed from the Pumi language, meaning « friend », and the second, *hunyin,* a Chinese word meaning « marriage ». Other than the objection from the Moso, there are two more reasons, from an academic perspective, to abandon this term. First, *azhu* is a word used in a wide array of contexts and the Moso practice by no means suggests that all kinds of friends are sexual partners. Second, as will be discussed later, the features of the Moso visiting system does not fit any useful definition of marriage known to anthropology.

1. For further discussion of this issue, see Chapter 1, of my book in preparation, *In Pursuit of Harmony : The Traditional Moso Systems of Sexual Union and Household Organization.*

Like the issue of group naming discussed above, what to call the Moso visiting system was a perplexing conundrum I faced from the very beginning of my dissertation field work from 1987 to 1989. After intensive investigation, I found that in Naru there is neither an abstract noun exclusively denoting the Moso visiting relationship, nor a term for any type of sexual union corresponding to marriage in other societies. As the meanings of sexual-reproductive institution for the Moso were starkly different from those for the societies I was familiar with, all my attempts in searching for the nomenclature of the Moso visiting system through direct questioning proved futile. My quest, however, was eventually fulfilled fortuitously. In an effort to learn Naru, I always tried to follow my Moso assistant and repeat simultaneously in my mind what he said whenever he was translating questions I could not phrase. I also tried to do the same when he and my informants were engaged in a conversation, no matter whether I could comprehend it. In such a practice, it emerged more and more cleary to me that indeed in Naru there is a euphemism which is used unmistakably to refer to the visiting sexual relationship, namely, *tisese*. This term literally means « walking back and forth », with *ti* meaning « walk » and *sese* as a suffix denoting the continuing condition of the action expressed by the verb. *Tisese* is either used as a verb or a noun, rather like a gerund in English. I first caught this term in the conversations between my Moso assistant and the interviewees. After I clarified all my doubts about the denotations and connotations of this expression with my assistant, I used it repeatedly in my household survey. My informants always immediately grasped what I meant by this locution and responded to my questions spontaneously. The word *tisese* sounded natural to them and they did not show any sign of confusion or disturbance – no embarrassment, no repugnance, not even increased alertness. It was all natural except that sometimes they laughed at how a non-native speaker of Naru could have picked up this term.

Given that the Moso visiting relationship is so unique that no term in other languages could possibly fit it squarely and that *tisese* is the idiomatic way used by the Moso when talking about their unique visiting relationship, I have adopted this readily available Naru expression in my analysis of Moso culture (Shih 1993).

Tisese : What Makes It Unique ?

Briefly, *tisese* is the primary sexual-reproductive institution among the Moso, which differs from marriage in that it is noncontractual, nonobligatory, and nonexclusive (Shih 1993). *Tisese* has been the most flexible pattern of institutionalized sexual union known to anthropology. Although traditional Moso society was stratified in three classes, namely, the *sipi*, the aristocrats, the *dzeka*, the commoners, and the *wer*, the serfs, *tisese* was virtually class-blind from the vantage point of either gender.

For a *tisese* relationship, the only prerequisite is a mutual agreement between the two partners to allow sexual access to each other. Neither establishment nor relinquishment of the relationship requires any ceremony or exchange of presta-

tions. In a typical *tisese* relationship the two partners work and consume in their matrilineal households respectively. The man visits the woman, stays with her overnight, and goes back to his own household the next morning. Although it is a common practice that the man would help the woman's household in agricultural busy seasons, it is not a requirement. In principle, the relationship does not affect the partners' socioeconomic status nor does it commit them to exclusive or enduring relationship. Children born to such a union belong to the household in which they were born, usually that of the mother. In no circumstances will a child be considered as illegitimate *(ibid.).* Although duolocal residence is a defining characteristic of *tisese*, it is not an inviolable principle. Under particular circumstances, uxorilocal, virilocal, or neolocal residence can also take place contingent upon the compositions of and interpersonal dynamics in the households of the two partners. Albeit cohabiting residence may imply or result in a more lasting relationship, it signifies neither commitment nor duties and obligations. The moved-in partner can leave at his or her free will. As it carries no binding force whatsoever, *tisese* is not a legal institution in any sense.

In the collective memory of the Moso, *tisese* has been their way of life since time immemorial. It is the pivot of Moso culture not only in that it provides the premise and foundation of the cultural values that lend meaning to life for the Moso, but also in that it is the ultimate ethnic mark that sets the Moso off from any other cultures. Precisely because of its distinctive features, however, *tisese* has often found itself in severe adversities in the ideological milieu of the larger society. From the perspectives of the dominant ideologies in China, at first the patriarchal Confucianism and then the evolutionary communism, *tisese* has been considered either « immoral » or « primitive », that is, something that needs to be corrected or civilized. During the two decades marked by the 1956 Democratic Reform in the Yongning area, by which Moso society was fully incorporated into the Chinese Communist system, and the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976, wave after wave of campaigns were launched by the government to convert *tisese* into marriage. The assault on *tisese* culminated in the 1975-1976 « One-Wife-One-Husband Movement » in which draconian measures were taken to force sexual partners to live under one roof. As a result, up to mid-1976, 424 couples in the Yongning area were forced into registered marriage (Shih 1991).

Under the political pressure, the Moso did not just conform to the government reform passively. As a measure of resistance, they altered the meanings of *tisese* in their discourse so as to make it sound and seem less exotic. When I began my field work in the late 1980s, I was painstakingly led by the Chinese-speaking Moso elites to believe that *tisese* was by no means « free and unregulated » *(suibian luanlai).* By their account, there was virtually no difference between *tisese* and marriage except duolocal residence. Nonetheless, my inquiry (by means of comprehensive household survey and extensive personal interviews) reveals that *tisese* is indeed a *sui generis* cultural institution which differs from marriage in the above summarized characteristics. On the other hand, my research also shows that both the discourse and practice of *tisese* have been subject to continued remaking in response

to the ever changing social conditions. For example, the once class-blind principle was abandoned and mate selection turned highly class-sensitive during the two decades (1956-1976) when the terror of the « proletarian dictatorship » was in full swing. For another instance, as an effective reification of the changed discourse depicting *tisese* as virtually exclusive and monogamous, partnership of *tisese* had become far more focused by the late 1980s than in traditional times. For yet another example, in stark contrast with the discourse of the 1980s, by the late 1990s, the noncontractualness, nonobligatoriness, and nonexclusiveness of *tisese* were exaggerated when the Moso tourism entrepreneurs in Luoshui village were trying to persuade their guests to stay longer or come again by suggesting that in doing so their chance of exciting encounter would be more real. All the fluxes in praxis and discourse notwithstanding, the basic features of *tisese* as defined at the beginning of this section have endured.

Is *Tisese* a Form of Marriage?

Marriage is widely believed to be universal (*e.g.* Murdock 1949 ; Leach 1955 ; Gough 1959 ; Ember & Ember 1999). Politically, indeed, to stand up and make a point that the primary sexual-reproductive institution of a certain society is something other than marriage is tantamount to inviting denouncement for exoticizing or stigmatizing that society. From an analytical perspective, however, when deciding if A is B, the reasonable way is first to define B and then examine if A fits that definition. By the same token, to answer whether *tisese* is marriage, we need first to decide what marriage is.

Ever since the beginning of anthropology as an academic discipline, repeated attempts have been made to achieve a universal definition for the most fundamental social institution that we loosely refer to as marriage. The train of thoughts, however, was in reverse direction of the reasoning logic, that is, anthropologists have relentlessly tried to work out a universal definition of marriage because marriage is assumed to be universal in the first place. The rationale is laid out clearly by Kathleen Gough (1959 : 24) : « for purposes of cross-cultural comparison, we do need a single, parsimonious definition, simply in order to isolate the phenomenon we wish to study ». Since the premise of the universality is not well grounded, the endeavor for a universal definition has proved futile. With the increase of ethnographic literature, new cases continue to break the pale of established definitions. Consequentially, some definitions became so amorphous that they lost any utility for their purposes[2]. However, if nothing else, the better known definitions of marriage in anthropological literature[3] all agree, by expression or implication, on at least one point : that marriage is something which

2. See my book in preparation, *In Pursuit of Harmony … op. cit.*
3. An incomplete list includes Maine 1864 ; Morgan 1963 [1877] ; Malinowski 1930 ; Evans-Pritchard 1951 ; RAIGBI 1951 ; Leach 1955 ; Gough 1959 ; Goodenough 1970 ; Dillingham & Isaac 1975 ; Harris 1983.

Henry Maine (1864 : 154) would call « a bundle of rights, duties, and remidies ». In other words, despite the varied characteristics that defy definition, most anthropologists have realized that marriage is a legal institution that lends the involved parties understood claims and, at the same time, binds them with understood obligations.

If legality is taken as the defining characteristics of marriage, we can then attest that *tisese* is not a form of marriage because it is noncontractual, nonobligatory and nonexclusive. This conclusion will more than likely court strictures from native intellectuals and anthropologists alike. Before engaging in fruitless crossfire, however, it is useful first to rethink the premise of the universality of marriage and the connotations around this concept. As Marvin Harris notes (1983 : 93), there is a tendency to regard sexual relationships other than marriage as less honorable or less authentic relationships. He also insightfully points out that this evaluation is unjust. Indeed, this tendency has made anthropologists reluctant to exclude from the rubric of marriage any system of institutionalized sexual union. For more than half a century, anthropologists have been forced to keep enlarging the boundary of the definition of marriage in a hopeless attempt to come up with a definition that is both all-embracing and useful. In my view, a more constructive approach is simply to slough off this unjust tendency and reexamine the universality of marriage (Shih 1993, Harrell 2000).

Why the Moso Practice *Tisese* ?

For anyone interested in the diversity of human patterns of institutionalized sexual union, it is tempting to inquire into the origin of *tisese*. Programed by the evolutionary mode of thinking, wittingly or unwittingly, most of us would not feel satisfied in our search of the origin of something unless we have found or theorized something else from which the thing in question supposedly came from. Thus patriarchy was thought to be preceded by matriarchy (*e.g.* Bachofen 1948) and, contrarily, matrilocality is considered to have evolved from patrilocality (*e.g.* Devale 1984). Unlike the case of biological evolution, however, pertinent evidence in social evolution, particularly in societies without material record, is even harder to discern, if not untraceable at all, and in most cases unverifiable. Hence more than often the theorist is forced to resort to sheer speculation. While as an intellectual exercise speculation can be thought provoking and sometimes even germinating, it is no substitute for explanation based on hard evidence. My intensive interviews on this topic among the Moso elicited no trace leading to the existence of another practice that preceded *tisese*. The myriad literature in classical Chinese about the frontier peoples is of no help, either. The lack of evidence provides boundless space for speculation. In my view, however, to reach an explanation by analyzing available information is more convincing, if not as gratifying, than to fashion a predecessor of *tisese* out of sheer speculation. Therefore, no assumption that *tisese* has evolved from something else is made in my analysis.

Regarding the reasons for having *tisese*, the prevailing discourse among the Moso is that they and their ancestors have been practicing *tisese* since time immemorial. For them this is the most sensible way to manage their sexual-reproductive behavior, and no further reason or justification is needed. However, this explanation, respectable as it is, cannot satisfy even the most credulous anthropologist for lack of warrant in its reasoning. Through participant observation of interpersonal dynamics in well over one hundred households, exchanges of views on social values and meanings of life with hundreds of Moso individuals, systematic study of the Moso family system – particularly the conditions of household division and formation –, as well as collection and analysis of myths, legends, and all kinds of cultural idioms, I have gradually realized that Moso culture is permeated by a set of notions or beliefs that, for analytical purpose, I simply call the Moso matrilineal ideology. In my view, the Moso matrilineal ideology is the key to our understanding of why the Moso prefer *tisese*.

In summary, the Moso matrilineal ideology mainly includes the following notions : 1) For one's life mother is essential whereas father is accidental. 2) Relatives connected by blood through mother are of one root and are destined to stay together and support each other. 3) The relationship among matrilineal kin is unbreakable and perpetual. This world is but one leg of the journey that constitutes the total human experience. The terminal destination of it is the ancestral land in the north where Moso forebears originated and to which all deceased Moso must go back to live in harmony and eternity (Shih 1998). 4) As all women are potential mothers, the supreme reverence for mothers is extended to femaleness. From deities to human beings, the female is believed to be superior to the male. Women are considered not only mentally stronger, but also physically more capable, if not always more powerful, than men. And 5) happiness is defined as the ability to live in harmony with matrilineal kin. The ultimate meaning of life in this world is to uphold and maintain household harmony (Shih 1993 ; 1998).

The concept of marriage as we know it entails change of household membership of either or both spouse(s). This does not only suggest that either one or both partners in a newly established union are removed from their respective household, as is the case in virilocal or uxorilocal residence. Such a move also has the potential to disturb the harmony of the household that receives the bride or the groom. For most members in that household, the person who moves in is inevitably a stranger or an intruder. Their interest in her or him is always ambivalent or double-sided. In consequence, conflict among the in-laws is more than often a normal state of affair. For these reasons, marriage is obviously incompatible with the Moso matrilineal ideology, particularly the notions of the unbreakable bond among the matrilineal kin and the supreme value placed on household harmony. The Moso are not alone in their concern about discord among in-laws. Various societies have worked out different ways to deal with this problem. Americans adopt neolocal residence (Schneider 1980), and in some parts of China, « minor marriage » was practiced to solve this issue (Wolf & Huang 1980 ; Wolf 1995). Although other cultural, social and eco-

nomic factors are also responsible for these American and Chinese practices, reducing conflict among the in-laws and maintaining household harmony are definitely relevant. For the Moso, marriage with duolocal residence might also fulfil the goals of safeguarding household harmony by avoiding potential conflicts among in-laws. Nonetheless, they have opted for the most thorough of alternatives, *i.e.* to annihilate the conjugal bond itself, and thus brought the problem to its logical end.

In traditional Moso society (*i.e.* up to 1956), the significance of household harmony went beyond the matrilineal ideology. The small-scale agrarian economy and the native chieftain system *(tusi zhidu)* made the Moso a household oriented society in which most people had no other social roles than their kinship ones, and household was their only basic social affiliation. In such a society, domestic interpersonal dynamics significantly affected the quality of life for every household member. The social reality and matrilineal ideology were mutually promoting and made *tisese* the best choice for the Moso.

Is the Moso "a Society with Neither Father Nor Husband" ?

One and a half decades after the Moso were bluntly touted as « a living fossil of the family » in the title of an article by a Marxist Chinese ethnologist (Yan 1982), it is stunning indeed to see that the same people were featured again as « a society with neither father nor husband » in the title of a scholarly book, this time by a French-trained Chinese anthropologist (Cai 1997). Personally, it was disconcerting for me to see myself quoted in an article entitled « Le peuple où le père n'existe », in such a way that it sounded as though I were in agreement with Cai Hua's characterization of the Moso (Pierron 1998)[4]. Of course I am eager to take the first and every chance to disavow myself from such unscrupulous sensationalization. Beyond personal concerns, however, it is of great importance to redress this misrepresentation from a purely academic perspective.

It goes without saying that *tisese* renders the role of husband irrelevant. As a whole, however, the Moso cannot be properly called a « society without husbands ». As I have discussed elsewhere, traceable evidence shows that a secondary type of sexual union, known today as *ri-chi-ha-dzi* in Naru, entered Moso society in the thirteenth century and became institutionalized in the seventeenth[5]. Above all, this latter type of institutionalized sexual union among the Moso is, to borrow Leach's words (1961 : VI), a case of « affinal ties which bind a particular wife to a

4. In Véronique Pierron's article in *Le Monde de L'Éducation* (1998 : 39), I was quoted as saying : « le géniteur, le père n'existant pas, n'a aucun rôle, ni droit sur l'enfant à naître... ». I cannot believe that I might have made such a statement for the content is at odds with what I have always known since my first trip to the Moso area. Using the « Find » function of my word processor to scan the word « father » in every piece I have written about the Moso, including my correspondence with my French colleagues, I could not find the above quoted phrase. I would be happy to correct the mistake if the source of the quotation is made known to me.

5. See my forthcoming article, « The Origin of Marriage among the Moso and Empire-Building in Late Empirial China », *Journal of Asian Studies*.

particular husband ». Thus I simply call it « marriage » in my writings[6]. The ethnologists who first conducted field work among the Moso report that by 1956 about 10 to 14 % of the sampled adult population were formally married (Zhan *et al.* 1980 ; Yan & Liu 1986). My own investigation shows that by 1989, among the 524 living adults in the four villages in which I conducted comprehensive household surveys, 73 or 13.9 % were or had been married (Shih 1993). These statistics depict the situation in Yongning proper, or the basin area where *tisese* has prevailed. In some villages in Labo, or the mountainous area, which accounts for nearly half of the greater Yongning area, the proportion of formally married couples was as high as 59.2 % in the early 1960s (Zhou 1988). It must be clear to any reasonable mind that such a presence cannot be dismissed as an « exception ». To Cai's credit, his book does include a chapter on marriage among the « Na » (1997 : 227-250), questionable as the discussion is. Unfortunately, his knowledge that a considerable portion of the Moso have or are husbands did not keep him from calling them « a society without husbands ».

The characterization of Moso as « a society without fathers » is even more absurd. Cross-culturally, the concept « father » may comprise one or more of three roles : 1) ego's genitor, or culturally presumed biological father ; 2) ego's principal supporter and male role model in the immediate ascending generation ; and 3) mother's husband or sexual partner. In no society is it strictly required that all three roles be assumed by a single person. In some cases, modifiers may be used to make a distinction between the roles (*e.g.* « foster-father », « step-father », « genetic father », etc.). On the other hand, in most societies, the positions of the pater, or social father, corresponding to the second and third roles in the above definition, may be shared by more than one man. With less frequency, this is true even for the role of genitor in some societies (Barnard & Spencer 1996 : 607). By this definition, the Moso are not only a society with fathers, but also one whose concept of father is no more exotic than that in any other human society.

Since *tisese* is nonobligatory and nonexclusive, it is easy to assume that a child's sire is hard to identify. In reality, however, an overwhelming majority of the Moso born of a *tisese* union have a definite knowledge about the identity of their genitors and many men know some or all the children they begot. My newly computerized database, developed from a survey conducted in 127 households in four villages from 1987 to 1989, contains personal profiles of 1 493 individuals (among whom 877 are current household members and 616 are ex-members in the traceable memory of the current members). Of these profiles, 1 083 come with verified information regarding the father of the individual. This information was provided either by the individuals themselves or by the chief household members whom I interviewed, and then verified either by the fathers themselves (if they were still present in the area at the time of my field work), or by relatives of the concerned household. Only 410 profiles lack information about the father of the individual

6. See Shih 1993 ; see also my forthcoming article, « The Origin of Marriage among the Moso... » ; and my book in progress, *In Pursuit of Harmony...,* both quoted above.

because either no information was available or the information was unverifiable. Even for those individuals whose fathers are unknown, the reason for this cannot simply be attributed to *tisese,* as information regarding mothers is also missing from the profiles of 277 individuals.

Other than these indisputable data, evidence showing the Moso's recognition of the role of father can be easily picked up in their kinship terminology and cultural idioms, and practices such as the child recognition ritual in which the genitor presents gifts to the genetrix in recognition of the child he has begotten (Zhan *et al.* 1980 : 92-95 ; Yan & Song 1983 : 136). Moreover, in Cai's book, the Moso kinship terminology is reduced to fifteen terms (1997 : 112-113) and the term for father, *ada* (cf. Zhan *et al.* 1980 : 221 ; Yan & Song 1983 : 211-212), is conveniently omitted.

What is special about the notion of father among the Moso is that, due to the prevalence of *tisese*, on the one hand, the role of genitor and that of principal supporter and male role model are most often, if not always, assumed by different individuals [7], and, on the other, that the genitor and his children are most often, if not always, separated and living in their respective matrilineal households. The meaning of father to the Moso may be somewhat different from what an outsider is familiar with, but the evidence shows that, like any other human group, the Moso is a society with father.

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In recent years, while popular media have churned out a good amount of documents on the Moso in print and visual forms, serious anthropological works have just begun to emerge. For anthropology, the Moso is still a maiden case whose theoretical significance will not be fully appreciated for many years to come, partially because of the unavoidable limits and flaws of the ethnographies including mine. Much more endeavors are required to explore different aspects of this intriguing culture and to contribute to a more comprehensive and verisimilar picture that is recognizable to both natives and visitors. Meanwhile, it is imperative to gain insight through comparative studies on similar or partially similar groups in history and in present in other parts of the world, such as the Nayar, the Nafara, the Minangkabau, etc.

Based on the initial works available in Western languages up to date, some influential anthropologists have either personally engaged in the debate (Harrell 2000) or lent their prestige and opinion to Moso studies. Claude Lévi-Strauss thinks that this society is « une société miroir de la nôtre », in the sense that we have both wife takers and givers, whereas societies such as the Moso have neither (Pierron 1998). On the other hand, András Zempléni (in *ibid.*), apparently skeptical about Cai Hua's argument, deems that « seule l'absence supposée de paternité dans la terminologie et dans la pratique me semble véritablement unique ».

7. While able-bodied household members are all supporters, male role model is collectively assumed by mother's brothers.

Both Lévi-Strauss and Zempléni are right in that the Moso case is by no means so extraordinary that it can, as Cai audaciously declares, produce « un changement fondamental de perspective » *(ibid.).* It must be noted, however, that this is indeed a case that provides us with rare and valuable opportunities to reassess many current theories and explore new ones.

In cases known to anthropology, the closest to *tisese* is *sambandham* among the Nayars in Central Kerala (India), as described by Kethleen Gough and her successors[8]. However, *sambandham* was a historical case, and was neither noncontractual nor nonobligatory[9]. Because of the tali-tying ceremony as a prerequisite for *sambandham,* as well as the obligation a woman and her children owed to her ritual « husband » at his death, *sambandham* is still arguably a legal institution, however loose the binding force might be. Whereas, in *tisese,* there is no binding force whatsoever. This feature makes it fall beyond any useful definition of marriage and thus poses a challenge to the universality of marriage in human societies.

Nuclear family is another institution held by current anthropological wisdom as universal (Radcliffe-Brown 1941 : 2 ; Murdock 1949 : 2 ; Lévi-Strauss 1963 : 51). However, as both cause and effect of *tisese*, a typical Moso household comprises only matrilineal kin with neither affinal relatives nor conjugal units. This fact does not only force us to reconsider the basic building block of a kinship system and domestic structure, but also offers a very special window to examine household economy and interpersonal psychological dynamics in the milieu of a grand household.

The above are just two examples of how *tisese* can contribute to reinvigorate kinship studies. Beyond concerns of classical kinship studies, *tisese* and its related phenomena as ongoing social processes are also invaluable to some central analytical domains of current anthropology. Here are some examples :

Both government statistics at the county level (1949-1990) and my initial analysis of the vital statistics of the 1493 individuals in my database (with birth dates ranging from 1860 to 1989) show that the Moso had low fertility and mortality rates that are usually considered to be the result of modernization (Shih & Jenike 1998). Low fertility and mortality rates coupled with the Moso's distinct family system make this population a particularly interesting case for the growing field of anthropological demography.

Whatever their current theoretical stances might be, all scholars concerned with gender issues will find the actual practice of the Moso matrilineal ideology behind *tisese* a most provoking case for rethinking or refining their arguments.

The evolving self-representation of *tisese* by the Moso in response to the social changes they have encountered over the last four decades, as well as the recent impact of ethnic tourism in the Moso area, provides excellent opportunities for studies in ethnicity, identity, and self-presentation.

8. Gough 1950, 1952, 1955, 1959, 1961 ; Nakane 1963 ; Mencher 1965 ; Fuller 1976 ; Moore 1985.
9. For a detailed comparison of *tisese* and *sambandham,* see Shih 1993 : chap. 8.

The list can be extended, but the point has been made. While no single case can possibly « shake all the social theory of the occidental world »[10], Moso society is indeed exceptionally rich in anthropological significance.

KEY WORDS/*MOTS CLÉS :* sexual union/*relation sexuelle* – marriage/*mariage* – matrilineal descent/*matrilinearité* – family/*famille* – China/*Chine.*

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10. « Cai Hua has made known that his theory is going to shake all the social theory of the occidental world » (Personal correspondence from Pierron, 29.9.1998).

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Chuan-kang Shih, Tisese, *and Its Anthropological Significance. Issues around the Visiting Sexual System among the Moso.* — This article addresses some controversial issues around *tisese,* a visiting sexual-reproductive institution among the Moso in Southwest China, and discusses the anthropological significance of this case. Topics include the group naming of the Moso ; the nomenclature of the visiting system, how to understand the uniqueness of *tisese,* and whether it should be understood as a form of marriage, why the Moso have kept it and how to understand the roles of father and husband in this society. The article argues that *tisese* is indeed a *sui generis* institution which does not only challenge the anthropological wisdom of such fondamental human institutions as marriage and nuclear family, but also has broad relevance to current theoretical interests such as gender, identity, ethnicity, political economy and anthropological demography.

Chuan-kang Shih, *Tisese. Approche anthropologique d'une société à visites: les Moso.* — Cet article aborde un certain nombre de problèmes que pose le système à visites, appelé *tisese,* que l'on rencontre chez les Moso de Chine du Sud, et il tente d'en saisir la signification anthropologique. Sont abordés successivement : la dénomination des Moso par eux-mêmes et par les autres, la nomenclature du système à visites, comment comprendre la caractère unique de *tisese,* et cette institution peut-elle être considéree comme une forme de mariage, pourquoi les Moso l'ont adoptée et comment appréhender le rôle du père et du mari dans cette société ? Pour l'auteur, il s'agit d'une institution *sui generis* qui, non seulement constitue un défi à des thèmes fondamentaux de l'anthropologie tels que le mariage et la famille nucléaire, mais présente aussi un intérêt majeur pour l'approche théorique du genre, de l'identité, de l'ethnicité, de l'économie politique et de la démographie.